promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which here in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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The Function of the Minister in Relation to Rural Culture

By Eugene Smathers*

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Whatever I can contribute toward a better understanding of the minister in relation to rural culture grows out of seventeen years' experience as a rural minister. It is, therefore, not the result of academic theorization but of a practical day-by-day effort to bring the will of God to bear upon the total life of a small rural community, its families, and the whole complex of relationships which comprise its life. Since my experience has been limited to a relatively isolated and disadvantaged rural area, my reflections will be colored by this limited experience.

I approach this subject, as I have my actual ministry, with the conviction that God, who has revealed himself and his will in the coming of Christ, is the sovereign of all life and that, from the point of view of a Christian minister, there can be no separation of life into sacred and secular, spiritual and material. Life is a unity, and the righteous and loving purposes of God have to do with the whole. Our task as Christians, if we are true to the heart of our faith, is to strive to bring all men and all areas of life into subjection to Christ. Even though the Kingdom of God may never come fully in this earthly existence, the prayer which must always direct our effort is: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Christ became incarnate to declare the tie between the spiritual and the material: different but united. In prophecy he proclaimed their ultimate reunion in his own body. The material and the secular become the only medium for the expression of the spiritual and the sacred. If Christianity is the truth about God, it is also the truth about the whole of life.

As the Church faces its task in the world, it needs to act upon the two principles given classic statement by the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...." First is the principle of noncomformity, the recognition that those who comprise the true Church are a minority, a "peculiar people," a redeemed and a redeeming remnant, a new humanity, and that the task of the Church is to be the Church, to strengthen the faith and the discipleship of its members, and to become a fellow-

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ship worthy of the body of Christ. Second is the principle of cooperation and transformation: cooperation with all men of good will in the effort to better the common life and transformation of the life of the world through its own transforme life. The early Church acted upon these two principles. It combined participatic with a very large measure of spiritual detachment. The task of the Church is not negation but fulfilment. It is not to be a cloistered body; its task is more dyna mic and more difficult. It is to steadfastly remain in the world, yet to strive t establish a standard and a scale of values that is not "of it." "The community of God is not a separate growth from this world's ways but intertwined with it, pecu- liar, but conjoined, cleansed and cleansing by its discipline in the dust."

The attitude of the minister as he looks at his task of building Chris- tian rural communities must be a double one. As an ambassador of Christ, he must strive to bring the community in which he lives and labors as near to the Christia ideal of life in community as is possible in a world of sinful men, but he must ne ver give this community his absolute approval and unconditioned loyalty; he must place in it only such a qualified hope as would, even if it were to suffer complet destruction, leave his ultimate hope and security unshaken.

There is another basic conviction which should be mentioned: the Church cannot fulfill its task of making the Gospel effective and vital <u>in general</u>. It has to begin somewhere, and the best place is the local congregation, the family, and the local community. Unless Christianity becomes vital at the grass roots, it will be ineffective in coping with the crisis confronting modern culture. The world Christian community is built out of local communities that are becoming Christian. The ecumenical Church is constructed of local congregations. Without these, the larger entities are only abstractions. Sometimes ministers, in the earnestness and devotion of youth, want to do "big" things for the Kingdom, for- getting that the big things are but the composite of a multitude of little things faithfully and skillfully done. The crisis of our age is too great for the indi- vidual to do much about in general, but he can confront it best by attacking at the specific points at which it impinges upon the lives of his people. <u>The most effective contribution which the rural minister can make to a Christian world or- der and to the development of the ecumenical Church is the building of a Christia community in his local parish</u>.

We cannot overemphasize the importance of primary, face-to-face relatior ships of the small community in an age that is becoming increasingly mass-minded and impersonal. Some one has said that the essential problem of modern society is "to find democratic ways of living for little men in big societies." We might pa- raphrase this to say: to find ways of restoring personal relationships in an impe sonal society. According to Christian revelation, love is the law of life. Jesus taught that the true human life is grounded upon two eternal principles: love of God and love of neighbor. "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Paul said the same thing when he wrote: "Love is the fulfilling of th law." Love is the law of life and love can be realized only in a community of lif Man cannot realize God's intention for him by himself; he can be man only in commu nity, in a responsible and loving relationship to his fellowmen.

The primary task of the Church and the basic function of the minister is evangelistic: winning men to Christ. His Gospel must become vitally effective in all the relationships of life. We must not confuse evangelistic purpose with evan gelistic method. The purpose may permeate many activities which would not be called evangelistic. This evangelistic purpose means the building of Christian community beginning with the local neighborhood and extending in ever widening circles to include the whole of mankind. This is only the practical expression of

the evangelistic purpose of the Church. It is also our most effective evangelistic method. "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if you have love for another." Love means community.

It is difficult to separate the function of the minister into its constituent parts, but let us make the attempt. The following order has no relationship to the importance of the various aspects of the minister's task.

1. Leader of Worship and Builder of Christian Fellowship

The core of Christian community is the worship of God. One of the essential tasks of the minister is that of being a leader of worship, seeking to restore the relationship between worship and work -- a relationship often lost in modern rural life. The Church has contributed to the secularization of rural life by the remoteness of worship from life's real concerns and values. Without the intimate connection of the whole of rural life with the worship of God, secularization is inevitable. The work of the Church and other community agencies toward community building becomes merely a secular program. Science, unless supplemented and completed through worship, leads to the same end. Worship should "impart a significance to the daily round." The concerns of our common life need to be brought into the sanctuary and lifted into the light of the eternal purpose of God. Worship should "consecrate and illuminate with meaning the relations of family, neighborhood, recreation and friendship...." Rural worship as the celebration and consecration of the common life should exalt at least three great areas of rural life: man's moral relationship to the earth and its resources as a steward; the Christian home and family; and the values of rural life and the personal relationships of the small community.

Closely allied with the minister's task as the leader of worship is his function as a builder of Christian fellowship. That the Church develop this quality of fellowship is essential for two reasons: (1) the need of the individual Christian for the security which real fellowship alone can give and for Christian fellowship as the medium of his growth in discipleship; and (2) the witness of Christian fellowship to the reality and power of the Gospel. No one has better described this fellowship than Dr. J. H. Oldham in a classic statement which I quote in full:

> "The church should be the place where barriers of race, nationality, class, sex, and education are done away with; where the underprivileged, the downtrodden, the outcast and despised, find a welcome and feel themselves at home; a meeting ground where those who are divided in questions of politics and economics can realize afresh their unity in loyalty to a common Lord, can discuss their differences in the reality of this fellowship, and learn to understand one another. In the disintegration of social life, the church ought to provide centers in which men find protection, shelter, and security in the care and love of their fellowmen and rediscover the meaning of community in the support and comradeship of a society the members of which bear one another's burdens and seek the good of all. The church ought also to be the place not only where support and encouragement are given to those who need them, but where the more robust and vigorous may find their individualism and self-will disciplined and tempered and their purpose purified and strengthened in a common endeavor to learn and fulfill the will of Christ."*

The rural minister has some special advantages as a leader of worship and as a builder of Christian fellowship because of characteristics of rural living which make it congenial to worship and fellowship. Farmers deal with life, with the organic rather than the mechanical. Rural people, of necessity, still regard

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* THE CHURCH AND ITS FUNCTION IN SOCIETY, W. A. Visser 't Hooft and J. H. Oldham. Willett, Clark & Co., Chicago, 1937, p. 148. Used by permission.

themselves as part of the natural world. The impersonalization of life due to the worship of the machine and of bigness has not completely engulfed them. Living close to nature, they are aware of their dependence upon a power greater than themselves, a power over which they have no control, but a power with which they may cooperate. They have a sense of the continuity of life, tending to realize their debt to the past and their obligation to the future. Farming includes, and does not fragment, the whole of life. The personal, face-to-face relationships of neighborhood and small community make for "a mutuality of daily association and a network of personal moral relations which seek and find clarification and reconciliation and blessing from the Father of all." These are some values and concerns which the people have in common, which they may celebrate and consecrate in common worship.

2. Interpreter

Another essential function of the rural minister is that of interpretation. This includes both the interpretation of the Christian message in the language of the people and its practical application to their daily lives. It involves also the necessity of helping the larger community to see the relevance of Christian truth for its total life. This requires that the minister evaluate the various secular agencies and movements which are active in his community in the light of Christian criteria. In this sense the minister must exercise his prophetic function and maintain his freedom in the use of critical judgment. At the same time he must realize that the redemptive and community-creating activity of God is not confined to ecclesiastical channels. The Church has many allies in the task of building community. Without the fullest possible cooperation with these allies, the best efforts of the Church will be relatively fruitless. After becoming acquainted with these nonecclesiastical agencies and having made an evaluation of them, the minister has the task of interpreting the various activities to his people and relating them to the Christian purpose. Too often we in the Church exercise our critical faculties without taking the further step of relating the good in secular agencies and movements to the Christian cause.

One of the characteristics of modern society is the struggle for power on the part of various groups. If the Christian is to bear effective witness to his faith, he must become a responsible member of economic and social organizations and have a voice in their policies and program. In face of the gigantic problems of agriculture and rural life, the individual farmer, especially the small farmer, is helpless. He can only express himself as a part of some farm organization. The Christian farmer should belong to some such organization and seek, through his participation, to bring his religious convictions to bear upon its policies. This is true for other occupational groups as well. It is the minister's task to help the people to evaluate various organizations and to choose those which seem to be most in harmony with Christian principles. Participation in groups struggling for power often involves the Christian in compromise and, therefore, demands a profound understanding of Christian values.

Infiltration of secular organizations and activities by Christian laymen is a more effective means of bringing the Gospel to bear upon the life of a rural community than direct action by the Church in its corporate capacity. So one of the most valuable contributions of the Church to the building of Christian rural communities is the preparation of the laity for Christian action as participants in the various day-by-day affairs of the community. We need farmers, business men, public servants, laborers, and educators who are Christians and who have a vision of the Christian possibilities inherent in their daily work. We in the Church are prone to bewail the fact that religious instruction cannot be given in our public

schools but are blind to the need for schoolteachers who are Christian. The only way in which the Church can carry the implications of the Gospel into community life is through consecrated and intelligent laymen and women.

Another aspect of the minister's function as interpreter has to do with man's relationship to the land. Christians must see that these human lives of ours are a part of the totality of life, inextricably bound in the whole stream of organic life; that man, through ignorance and sin, can bring chaos into this unity and balance of nature.

This fact of man's interdependence with all life has practical implications for the program of the Church. Souls cannot be saved in abstraction. Soils, society, and souls belong together. The insights of our faith reveal that the good life for man is conditioned by a trinity of relationships: to God, to man, and to the earth. None of these relationships can be ignored or neglected without danger and disaster. To sin against the earth through abuse or wastage or to sin against our brothers through selfish hoarding of the earth and its life-giving resources, resources for both body and spirit, is a denial of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. Through the whole range of its program, the Church should seek to develop an understanding and love of the land as God's most precious material gift. "A land which the Lord thy God careth for: the eyes of the Lord thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year."

This implies that the minister and all leaders of the Church should gain an understanding of the programs of the various agencies working for the restoration, conservation, and enrichment of the soil, to champion such programs and to encourage Christians to participate in them. Again we need to remember that God works for the reconstruction of his world and for the well-being of man through other than ecclesiastical channels.

It is also the task of the minister to help his people understand the rightful place of science and technology in the achievement of a good rural life. Without this understanding, the rapid extension of technology in agriculture will result in the further secularization and depersonalization of rural life. This will bring impoverishment instead of blessing. Without a deep awareness of the sacredness of human life which comes from the insights of our Christian faith, science and technology can destroy as well as build. Science deals with the "how" of things and Christianity with the "why." The "why," the purpose for which things are to be used, is the fundamental question. "Know-how" alone does not necessarily contribute to a better life.

3. Integration

Another major task of the minister in relation to rural culture is in helping the Church become an agency for integration in the community. Modern life is fragmented and atomized; persons are specialists in parts of life and cannot see the forest for the trees. The one institution which has a transcendent perspective and world-view is the Church. Actually the Church, defined as a denominational congregation, is often a divisive force in community life which may contribute to the further fragmentation of life, dissipating spiritual resources in fratricidal strife. Not only from its theological perspective should the Church be an agency of integration, a builder of community, but also from a sociological perspective this task becomes the responsibility of the Church in many rural neighborhoods where it is the sole remaining voluntary institution.

Man needs to have his roots deep in an integrated community, and the

Church must help him find and build it. The minister should be the champion of co operation. In many instances it will be his responsibility to initiate movements for the coordination and integration of the multiform efforts for community develo ment.

If the minister is to fulfill his role as a community integrator, he mus see his community as a whole, and this will mean at least the following:

(1) An understanding of the basic social and economic trends affecting the life of the community.

(2) A knowledge of the local community -- its boundaries, local trends, the people their occupations and vocations, its social organization, its social values, and its relationship to outsiders.

(3) A knowledge of the basic problems and resources, both as they are seen by the people and by objective observers.

(4) A knowledge of the history of their own church and something of the history of the whole Christian movement in the community and of the present programs of other local congregations.

(5) An acquaintance with the leadership in the various phases of community life.

(6) A working knowledge of the techniques and methods of community organization, and an appreciation of the means through which common values, common ceremonie and celebrations can be related to the insights of the Gospel.

(7) An understanding of man himself, realizing that community cannot be built of self-centered individuals. Without the spirit of humility and mutuality engen dered by the Christian view of life, community is impossible. It is not enoug to patch a man's shirt; to manipulate his environment; man himself must be changed, transformed, redeemed. So the minister's basic task as a community builder remains a prophetic-redemptive task -- proclaiming God's judgment and mercy by creative deeds as well as by words.

Another important aspect of integration is the ministry of reconciliatio Conflicts are of many kinds, but an important example is that between farmer and l borer. There is urgent need for an increased understanding between these two grou and appreciation of their common interests and objectives, and this need presents a creative opportunity for the Christian minister.

All that I have been trying to say about the task of the Church and its ministry as an agency of integration the Apostle Paul expressed in a few classic words in the fifteenth and sixteenth verses of the fourth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians (Moffatt's translation):

> "For He, Christ, is the head, and under Him, as the entire Body is welded to- gether and compacted by every joint with which it is supplied, the due acti- vity of each part enables the Body to grow and build itself up in love."

4. Educator

A fourth aspect of the minister's task is that of educator. This includ responsibility for helping the local church develop an effective program of Chris- tian training and nurture through the Sunday school, the vacation church school,

he young people's organization, and other organizations of the church. It also ncludes the training of volunteer leaders for tasks in the church and community. oo often the term "leadership training," in the minds of church people, is too arrowly defined and too institutional-centered.

It is not within the range of my competence to consider the content and ethods to be used in all educational activities of the rural church. The purpose ere is to indicate some content of the educational program of the Church as it eeks to bring the Gospel to bear upon life, whatever the means or method of teach- ng. One objective of education should be the development of a Christian philoso- hy of rural life. Two elements of this philosophy would be the development of an nderstanding of the Christian conception of work and vocation and an appreciation f the meaning of Christian marriage and family life.

Modern culture has divorced worship and work, and for multitudes work is omething to be avoided rather than seen as an opportunity to become fellow work- rs with God in the ongoing processes of creation. The Church too often refers to rofessional religious vocations as sacred and implies that all other work is secu- ar. We need to recover a sense of vocation which gives dignity and worth to all abor essential to social well-being and to God's purposes. The fruits of labor, ather than the wages of labor, must become the controlling motive of the Chris- ian. Rural workers often feel that the contribution of their labor is not of the ame worth as that of people in other walks of life. This tends to create dissa- isfaction with rural life. The Christian view of work puts all necessary labor, hether it be agricultural, industrial, manual, or intellectual, on an equal basis.

Secularization of work has tended to clericalize the Church. This has rought about a condition in which religion is pushed out into the fringes of life, hut off in its own little compartment. If Christianity is to become effective in eal life, it must affect the decisions and values of men as workers. Professional eligious workers alone can never fulfill the mission of the Church in the world. ithout the Christian conception of work and vocation, Christian community is im- ossible.

The promotion of Christian marriage and family life is also an education- l activity of the Church. Too often we are tempted to think of the family as a eans for strengthening our local congregations, through membership and financial upport. The opposite motive would be more wholesome. We should use the resources f the Church to strengthen the family. The general quality of family life in its arish might well be considered a far more important measure of the adequacy of its rogram than its membership statistics or its attendance records. Ernest Groves nce said that the soundness of the Christian program can be discovered by its re- ognition of the spiritual significance of the family. From the earliest days the amily has been the basic unit of Christian community and the most important agency or the transmission of the Christian heritage. Every threat to the stability of hristian marriage and family life is necessarily a threat to the Church. The in- ividualism of American Christianity has contributed to the secularization of the amily and, to me, this constitutes not only a threat to the continuance of the hurch as an organized institution but also is a denial of the basic teachings of he Bible in regard to marriage and family life. Christianity needs again to be rounded on the family, and the family must be recovered as a center for religious nstruction and religious ceremony.

5. The Minister as Pastor

A final aspect of the many-sided task of the minister which brings his

labors more nearly into harmony with his Lord's earthly ministry is pastoral minis try. Here he confronts the individual with his tensions, frustrations, and possi lities. Here he sees firsthand the impact of secular culture and the evils of so ciety upon the person. Here he discovers the evils within which result in evils without. As a shepherd of the sheep, a seeker of the lost, the friend of publica and sinners, and of the poor and broken-hearted, the heart of a pastor is knit wit that of his people, and from that love springs his motivation to fulfill the othe obligations of his ministry. The good pastor must identify his life with that of his people, and by his people I mean all within the community of his ministry and not just those on the membership roll of his congregation. Out of identification will come the desire to bring the riches of God's grace into the life of his peop and their community through every possible channel and into the world of which th are a part. As he lives with these citizens of a world bound together by a mecha cal unity, bound together for good or ill, he will sense the responsibility of th Church for developing world Christian community in which the Gospel shall rule in the hearts of all men.

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